

Stillwater River Conservation Project Region 1



The Stillwater River surrounded by the project lands

Wildlife Habitat Land Project Proposal June 2019

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THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

WILDLIFE HABITAT LAND PROJECT PROPOSAL

(vers. 4/2019)

1. **Region:** 1 **Regional Supervisor:** Jim Williams

Name of Applicant(s): Kris Tempel (Region 1 Habitat Conservation Biologist),

Alan Wood (Wildlife Science Program Supervisor), Neil Anderson (Region 1

Wildlife Manager)

2. **Date:** June 14, 2019

3. **Project Name:** Stillwater River Conservation Project

Type of Project: Conservation Easement

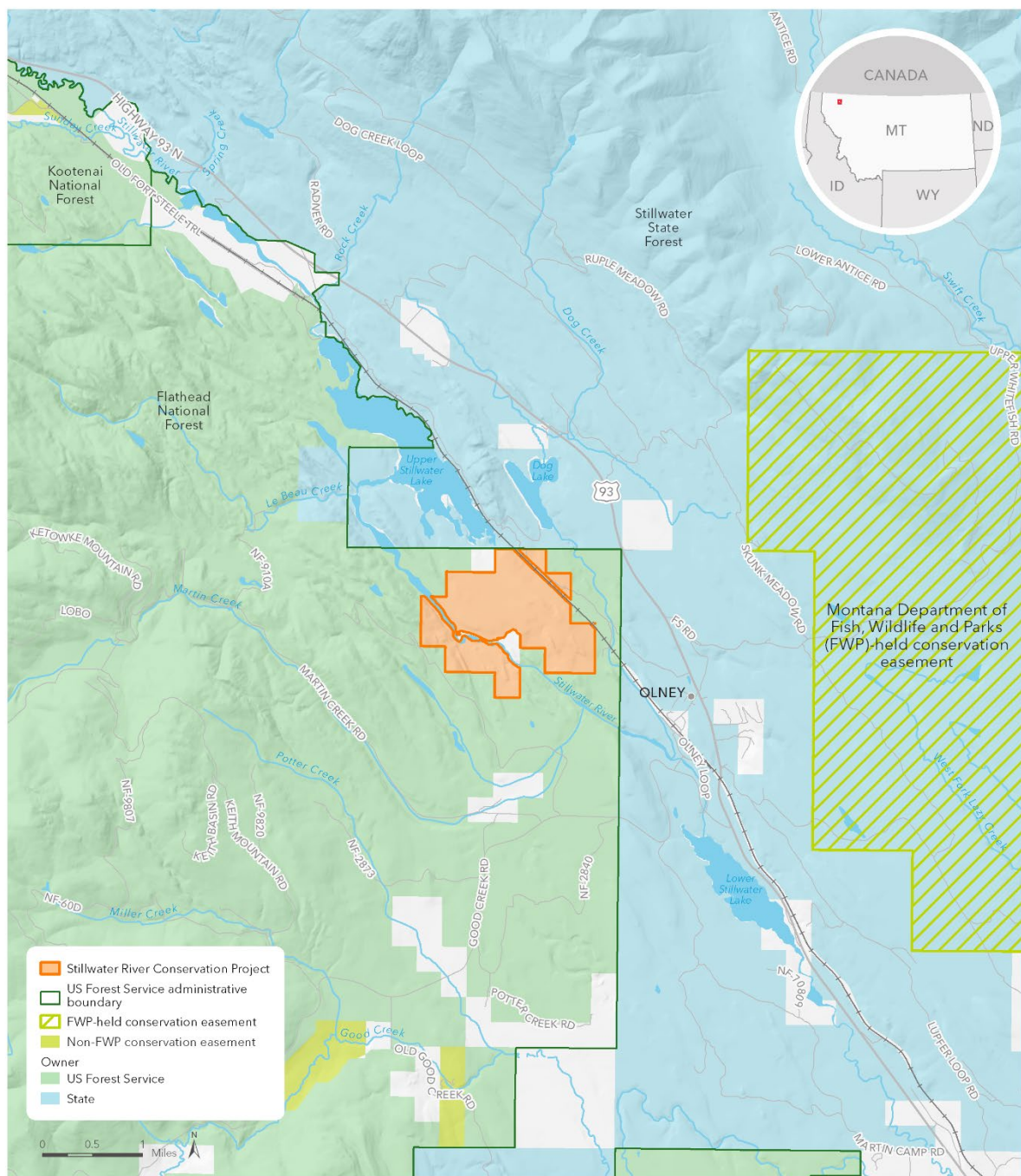
4. **Size:** Approx. 1,000 acres

5. **Location:** Approx. 10 miles north of Whitefish, Flathead County, Region 1

6. **Map:** See Figure 1 (p. 2)

7. **Project Need:**

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and The Trust for Public Land are working to place a conservation easement (CE) on approx. 1,000 acres of important riparian and lowland forestland in northwest Montana (Fig. 1). This donated conservation easement project would protect Tier I Terrestrial and Aquatic Focal Areas while allowing year-round public recreation access for hunting, fishing, and wildlife viewing. The project lands provide habitat for 42 species of greatest conservation need as well as hunting opportunities for deer, elk, moose, black bear, mountain lion, wolf, forest grouse, and turkeys. It meets all three goals for Habitat Montana: 1) conserving wildlife populations by requiring the property to be managed to protect its wildlife habitat, 2) adding to a larger landscape of conservation stretching from the Continental Divide to the border of Idaho and beyond, and 3) allowing traditional forestry practices to occur while preserving wildlife habitat and a key connectivity corridor. It also has all seven benefits required of the program: 1) conserving land, water, and wildlife resources, 2) providing both hunting and fishing opportunities, 3) conserving habitat on private land, 4) allowing for non-hunting recreation, 5) protecting open space and the scenic views along the Stillwater River, 6) promoting habitat friendly forestry, and 7) maintaining the local tax base while simultaneously promoting traditional land uses compatible with sustaining fish and wildlife habitat.



Stillwater River Conservation Project

FLATHEAD COUNTY, MONTANA

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Figure 1. Map showing the donated conservation easement project area in orange.

8. Broad Terrestrial and Aquatic Habitat Criteria

The Stillwater River Conservation Project consists entirely of Tier I terrestrial community types. Broadly, approximately 840 acres (84%) of the property are forest and woodland systems and approx. 140 acres (14%) are open water/wetland and riparian systems. More specifically, the property has 660 acres (66%) of conifer-dominated forest and woodland (xeric-mesic), 180 acres (18%) of conifer-dominated forest and woodland (mesic-wet), and 80 acres (8%) of floodplain and riparian. Approximately 30 acres of the property is open water and another 30 acres are a combination of wet meadow, herbaceous marsh, and bog/fen community types (Fig. 2). The property contains approximately 1.0 mile of the Stillwater River. There is no cropland on the property.



Figure 2. *Riparian areas and wetland along the Stillwater River surrounded by the forested project lands.*

9. Project Level Criteria

a) Site-Specific Habitat Values

The project lands provide key habitat for 42 Species of Greatest Conservation Need as identified in Montana's 2015 State Wildlife Action Plan; including, but not limited to, fisher, wolverine, northern goshawk, great blue heron, great gray owl, western toad, westslope cutthroat trout, western pearlshell, and northern alligator lizard. Sixty percent of the property is probable fisher habitat. The entire property is male wolverine dispersal habitat. The property is also habitat for federally listed grizzly bears and is considered to be "consistently occupied habitat" (COH) by FWP. The property supports populations of mule and white-tailed deer, elk, moose, black bear, mountain lion, wolf, forest grouse, and turkeys. One hundred percent of the property is winter range for moose and 80% is elk winter range. The property's vegetation cover ranges from dense old growth to patches of deadfall to significant wetlands. The last timber harvest occurred over 30 years ago, and the entire property now consists of a healthy riparian and lowland forest which includes Douglas-fir, western larch, lodgepole pine, ponderosa pine, and scattered aspen, cottonwood, and birch.

b) Threat Status

The threat status of the project is probable. Growth in Flathead County places pressure on all pristine parcels in close proximity, such as the Stillwater Conservation Easement Project. The rich recreation opportunities inherent to the subject property also make it appealing, and thus, vulnerable, to a private buyer looking for a trophy land asset or potential subdivision into several lots. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the population of Flathead County increased by 22.1% between 2000 and 2010, an average annual gain of 2.0%. From 2000 to 2010, the number of housing units – including occupied and unoccupied - in Flathead County increased by 25.1%, for an annual average of 3.7%. Growth in population and housing units has continued since 2010.

c) Focal Priority

The entire property is in the Whitefish Stillwater Tier I Terrestrial Focal Area and also entirely in the Stillwater River Tier I Aquatic Focal Area. This project is part of an ongoing multi-partner conservation initiative which includes FWP, The Trust for Public Land, various timber companies, and multiple federal, state, private funding sources to protect large landscapes of working forest and fish and wildlife habitat in northwestern Montana over the last twenty years. The project area is important habitat for many fish and wildlife species and is prioritized in state conservation plans including the 2010 Montana State Assessment of Forest Resources, 2004 Flathead Subbasin Plan, 2003 MT Gray Wolf Management Plan and 1999 Conservation Agreement for Cutthroat Trout. Other initiatives also

have identified this property as a high conservation priority for many species, including the Whitefish Range Partnership, Western Governors Association Initiative on Wildlife Corridors and Crucial Habitat, NFWF's Grizzly Bear & Northern Rockies Wildlife Corridors Keystone Initiative, the Y2Y Conservation Initiative and the Heart of the Rockies Conservation Initiative. Using the Crucial Habitat Assessment Tool (CHAT), the Western Governors' Association's 2015 Wildlife Corridor Initiative determined the project lands to be the highest ranking for landscape connectivity for priority wildlife species (e.g., grizzly bear, wolves, lynx, elk).

d) Geographic Effectiveness

This 1,000-acre parcel is surrounded by public land: to the west, south, and east by the Flathead National Forest and to the north by the Stillwater State Forest. There are two separate 40-acre parcels of private land adjoining this property that will be going under private conservation easement with restrictions for only one home site on each parcel, so impacts from these private lands would be minimal to the conservation values of this conservation easement property. This property is only 2 miles from the recently completed FWP-held Lazy Creek conservation easement. Conservation of this parcel would protect a key hole in this landscape of public land, ensuring continued habitat connectivity for fish between Upper and Lower Stillwater Lakes as well as wildlife between Glacier National Park across the Flathead Forest all the way to the Cabinet-Yaak.

e) Contribute to hunting and fishing opportunity and other recreation

Under the terms of the conservation easement, free public access for hunting, fishing, and other recreation opportunities would be permanently secured. This scenic section of the Stillwater River supports kayaking and fishing opportunities (Fig. 3). Opportunities exist on the property for hunting deer, elk, moose, black bear, mountain lion, wolf, forest grouse, and turkeys. The property has easy access for the public. From Hwy 93, there is a network of Forest Service roads that run to property's borders and continue into the property accessing areas both to the east and west of the Stillwater River. With permission, the previous landowner allowed access for hunting, fishing, and other recreational opportunities on the property.



Figure 3. *The Stillwater River cutting through the project lands.*

f) Management Considerations

The habitat on this property is in good condition and not in need of restoration. Since this is a conservation easement project, the landowner would continue to be responsible for the property management costs, including weed control. Under the terms of the conservation easement, the property would be managed under an approved forest management plan similar to the one we developed for our other easement properties which would protect important habitats for key species in perpetuity. By eliminating future housing development, the project is likely to reduce ongoing FWP obligations by reducing future wildlife/human conflicts in an area that is highly prone to such conflicts. It would help reduce the need for additional time, effort and funding spent in wildlife conflict, which would likely offset the increased need to monitor our growing portfolio of conservation easements.